DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 429 CE 072 551

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TITLE Workplace Education Overview.
INSTITUTION Colorado State Dept. of Education, Denver. State Library and Adult Education Office.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 12p.; For related documents, see CE 072 552-559.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Basic Skills; *Educational Needs; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Practices; *Educational Trends; Program Development; *Workplace Literacy
IDENTIFIERS 353 Project

ABSTRACT

This document, which is intended for adult educators and others interested in developing and delivering a workplace education program, provides an overview of workplace education. First, workplace education programs are defined as programs in which adult learners are taught basic skills by using the functional context of their jobs and a curriculum that was developed after analyzing their critical job tasks to identify the basic reading, writing, math, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills required for them to perform their jobs competently. Discussed next are the concepts of workplace education as a business and workplace education as a partnership. After a brief discussion of the past, present, and likely future of workplace education, the following general steps in developing a workplace education based on the functional context approach are detailed: form a workplace advisory council, identify critical job tasks, conduct a workplace education needs assessment, perform a basic skills task analysis, develop a curriculum, provide instruction, and evaluate the workplace education program's effectiveness. Concluding the guide is a brief comment on starting a workplace education program. Contains 10 references. (MN)

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Workplace Education Overview

1995

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Funded by
The Adult Education Act 100-297 Section 353
Administered through
The Colorado Department of Education
State Library and Adult Education Office

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Education Overview Workplace

Adult educators are finding a niche in the workplace due to basic skills-poor employees coupled with global competitive pressures and an accelerated pace of change. More businesses are becoming aware of some of the reasons behind the difficulties in maintaining their competitive advantage and in instituting change. Employers are becoming increasingly aware that one of these reasons might involve the need to upgrade the basic skills of employees.

The nature of work in changing. There are more service-oriented and information-oriented positions than in the past. Technology has quickened the pace of work. Management is changing its form and function which in turn moves workers to a heightened level of participation and decision making. In view of these changes, the workplace basic skills of 10, 20, 30, or 40 years ago may need upgrading. Today's workforce spans all the age groups that correspond to these years. This realization is driving employers to seek assistance in updating employees' workplace basic skills through workplace education programs.

Adult educators are in a natural position to provide this assistance to employers. They can advise business about how workplace education programs can address their employees' basic skills needs and provide the educational services to meet these needs.

Workplace Education Definition

In a workplace education program, the adult learner is taught basic skills *using the content of the employee's job*. This is also known as functional context instruction. The curricula is determined by analyzing critical job tasks to determine the reading, writing, math, communication, problem solving and critical thinking skills that a competent employee uses on the job. This process, under the Adult Education Act covers from 0 to the 12 level.

Jorie Philippi (1991) defines workplace education stating, "Workplace literacy [education] programs that work meet the need for employee training in thinking strategies and basic skill applications used to perform job tasks." (p.1) Philippi continues her definition by contrasting workplace education programs and ABE/vocational education or technical training. She states:

1) Workplace programs teach skills in the context in which they will be used.

2) Workplace programs teach the applications of basic skills used to perform job tasks and not the content of the tasks themselves. (p.1)

This functional context approach enables effective transfer of basic skills to the employees' jobs and lives outside of the workplace.

Workplace Education as a Business

To a provider of adult basic education, workplace education is a business venture. Workplace education is an entrepreneurial undertaking that requires the expertise of an adult educator in combination with the competitive skills of a business person.

Adult educators are experts in adult learning theory and practice. Adult education providers have expertise in a myriad of topics that can directly benefit business such as providing basic and language skills instruction, conducting learning disabilities assessments, enabling transfer of learning, conducting skills assessment, conducting needs assessment, providing individualized instruction, instructing multi-level classes, and dealing with multicultural concerns, to name a few. This expertise along with entrepreneurial efforts in contracting workplace education programs with business, enable adult educators to reach a large adult learner population that might not access adult educational services elsewhere.

Workplace Education as a Partnership

Workplace educational programs may be defined as active partnerships between business and education providers. The operative term being *active partnerships*. This basic definition may sound simple, however, because of the working history between business and educational consultants, the expectations of the *active partnership* may differ greatly between the two partners.

Many business people have expressed dissatisfaction in their past *partnerships* with training consultants. Frequently, this dissatisfaction stems from the consultants inabilities to deliver the promised results. Consultants often approach business people with a prepackaged program with general training goals or outcomes. These programs provide off-the-shelf remedies to problems expressed by the business partners without analyzing and integrating the factors unique to each company. Consultants often assume these prepackaged programs will effectively address at least one of the company's concerns. Consultants seldom offer a customized program that guarantees company-specific results.

In contrast, the nature of a workplace education program requires customization which addresses specific problems experienced by the company. In workplace education, the term *partnership* refers to an active role by both the educational consultant and the business.

Training in the Past, Present and Future

A historical view of the training that employees have provided might start with technical training. Technical training covers a broad range of topics and audiences from the initial entry-level employee to upper management. Technical training also involves apprenticeship programs as well as training in new or changing procedures, regulations, and equipment.

The next level of training is associated with personal and professional development training. Employers found that limiting training to the technical aspects of the job did not allow employees the advancement opportunities on the job or enhance the employees' lives outside of work. Both have been found to be motivational factors for employees. Therefore, many companies provided additional courses in management, communication, staff development techniques, stress management, and time management.

Training opportunities continued to expand as the makeup of the workforce continued to change. Businesses became increasingly aware of the needs of special populations and began to provide or sponsor special needs training. Special needs training includes but is not limited to GED preparation courses, English as a second language courses, literacy courses and learning disabilities assessments. Business frequently entered into agreements with adult basic education providers to implement this training and many still do. Nevertheless, many companies are finding that these courses are not effectively addressing the workplace basic skills necessary "on the job". Therefore, workplace education training is becoming more popular in the business community.

Many companies are opting for workplace education training which effectively addresses workplace basic skills and their transfer to the job. As delineated in the previous definition, workplace education training has as its defining characteristics a functional context approach to instruction, a focus on workplace basic skills, and an instructional component that teaches the applications of basic skills used to perform job tasks and not the content of the tasks themselves. Workplace education training enhances technical and professional training through the strengthening of participants' basic skills.

It is important to note the training that companies provide varies greatly. Some companies have found that technical training meets their training needs while others have found they want to offer more training opportunities. In approaching companies with workplace education program proposals, the educational provider must ascertain the level of training commitment each company has. This can be accomplished through reading the company's culture. For more information about reading company culture, please see the guide in this series ***Understanding Corporate Culture***.

The Functional Context Approach

The functional context approach to instruction and curriculum design is defined as:

> *The use of actual job materials and simulations to teach the applications of basic oral, reading, writing, computational and reasoning skills to enable individuals to use printed and written information to perform specific job tasks competently.* (Philippi 1991, p.29)

Because the functional context approach is the basis of workplace curriculum and instruction, adult educators must perform various tasks during the program development to ensure an integrated, functional context approach. These general steps are:

- **Form a Workplace Advisory Council**
  A workplace advisory council consists of company representatives. This council provides both the business and educational provider a structure through which the workplace education program is developed and various issues and problems are identified and solved.

- **Identify Critical Job Tasks**
  The advisory council identifies specific tasks or departments that show indications of basic skills problems. These tasks or departments will be the focus of the workplace education program.

- **Conduct a Workplace Education Needs Assessment**
  Needs assessments are conducted at two levels. First an assessment is given to company representatives to ascertain the level of perceived need for the company. Second, a needs assessment is conducted with the workplace education participants to identify individual needs. Both assessments provide important information in the program development.

- **Perform Basic Skills Task Analysis**
  An analysis of the critical job tasks is conducted to identify the basic skills levels and their applications in those tasks. This information provides part of the basis for the functional context curriculum.

- **Develop Curriculum**
  The curriculum is developed based upon the information collected in the needs assessments and the job task analysis. The curriculum focuses on the applications of the basic skills used to perform the job tasks.

- **Provide Instruction**
  Instruction is provided using the functional context approach based upon the aforementioned curriculum.

- **Evaluate Workplace Program Effectiveness**
  A variety of evaluative instruments and procedures are utilized in evaluating the effectiveness of the workplace education program. These instruments and procedures are approved and/or developed with the assistance of the advisory council.

Each of these steps in highlighted further in subsequent guides in this series.

Starting a Workplace Education Program

As highlighted in the workplace education definition, workplace education is an entrepreneurial business venture that requires the expertise of an adult educator coupled with the competitive skills of a business person. As in any entrepreneurial business, a strong marketing strategy is the basis of getting clients. For further ideas about getting started in workplace education, please see the guide ***Marketing Workplace Education to Business***.

This guide has provided a brief review of workplace education through its definition, history and function. For more information on developing workplace education programs, please refer to the other guides in this series and the resources listed in the back of this guide. As always, the Office of Adult Education will provide technical assistance or training to facilitate your workplace education efforts.

For assistance contact:

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